Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire
Revue pluridisciplinaire de la Fondation Auschwitz

121 | 2015
Violences radicales en scène

Extreme violence on stage

Presentation

Violences radicales en scène

Christian Biet, Philippe Mesnard and Anneleen Spiessens

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3255
DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.3255
ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:
Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 October 2015
Number of pages: 42-46
ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference
Christian Biet, Philippe Mesnard and Anneleen Spiessens, "Extreme violence on stage ", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 121 | 2015, Online since 01 October 2016, connection on 05 September 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/3255 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.3255

DOSSIER

→ Dossier edited by **Christian Biet, Philippe Mesnard** and **Anneleen Spiessens**

© Koen Broos

EXTREME VIOLENCE ON STAGE

Extreme violence shows itself. It bursts through the screens. It surfs from one style and medium to another: news reports, documentaries, fiction, arts of all kinds. Yet theatre distinguishes itself from this mêlée all while constantly returning to the subject. Differently. Linked from its origins to the representation of cruelty and having "miraculously" escaped the often sterile polemics on the interdiction (or not)... of representing the Holocaust, it is still with the same youthfulness that theatre deals with extreme violence today, relentlessly pursuing the articulation of ethics and aesthetics.

PRESENTATION

The visibility of extreme violence has increased in recent years. From our Smartphones and tablets to the big screen, violence is overrepresented, and so is its memory. Prestigious commemorations and large-scale memorial scenographies (museums, memorials, reenactments etc.) give society the impression that the authorities – big or small, cultural or political – control and shape the past. Our lives are under the spell of this "topicality" of things, which is in every aspect *mise en scène*. But what "scene" are we talking about? Is it the "live" scene that expands proportionally to the individual devices we all possess? This "live" aspect, which maintains the illusion of the real because we film crimes or catastrophes in real time and individually – that is, by representing *ourselves* through images? Are we talking about news reports, documentaries and fictional works that force viewers to witness disasters that we know happened in reality? Even the performing arts can be called up to serve the official memorial choreographies. That is what happened on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 2014, during the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the Allied landings; or in April 2004 and 2014, for the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. The staging of power today is performed through memorial ceremonies just as much, if not more, than through military deployment. Given the big spectacle that always accompanies these ceremonies, the art involved in it is instrumentalized and therefore merely appears in its technical aspects.

We are left to wonder: is it still relevant to ask what theatre can offer when dealing with memory issues? Well, theatre can indeed make the difference. With its dynamism, and the critical potential characteristic of an art form that is in direct contact with its audience, theatre can address issues of memory and the violent events that underlie them by responding to a prime ethical requirement: not to merely place the public in the position of passive spectator and consumer. Leaving aside that part of the discipline that yields to bourgeois dramatic conventions, theatre is a true laboratory that can still transmit knowledge – if not on its own limits, then on the subjects of enslavement, alienation or destruction. Theatre can in fact avoid the pitfalls of memorial commonplace, and conversely maintain or even recreate the kind of relationship with society that is today neglected or lost because of those large-scale commemorative initiatives, piloted by politicians and those who call themselves "memory managers".

How does the theatre represent the extreme violence of genocides, massacres or the slave trade? How does it instruct the public and help them position themselves on the subject? What leeway exists to avoid both the field of memorial attractions and the confused *doxa* on mass violence?

How does the theatre represent the extreme violence of genocides, massacres or the slave trade? How does it instruct the public and help them position themselves on the subject? What leeway exists to avoid both the field of memorial attractions and the confused *doxa* on mass violence? These questions have guided the choice of this dossier. We have indeed sought to complement analytical essays with interviews of stage directors. With this view, and based on the limited framework of this publication, we have made a number of choices – contemporaneous rather than historical ones. We left aside legends such as Armand Gatti, Claude Régy, Edward Bond and Sarah Kane, whose numerous analyses can be read in journals and books published in recent years, to bring lesser-known authors to the notice who explore the place violent reality occupies in contemporary theatre, and investigate its responsibility to *pass on* and stimulate reflection on this issue. The place of the real and the mechanisms of its representation are at the heart of *Kamp* of the Dutch company Hotel Modern (see Charlotte Bouteille Meister), of several productions on the Rwandan genocide (see Klaas Tindemans), and of the revisited documentary theatre of Dorcy Rugamba (interview). *Kamp*'s aesthetic stance is to multiply scenes in a single performance in order to reflect upon what is shown – the Nazi concentration camps and genocidal violence inside the camp – but also to challenge the audience and make them question what they see, and from which perspective they see it. Confrontation of "white" audiences with the actors on stage is a key strategy in "European" productions on the Rwandan genocide, such as *Rwanda 1994*, *Ruanda Revisited* and *Hate Radio*. All three performances engage directly with mass media accounts from the genocide (newspapers, television, radio), but propose different lines of dramatization. Like *Hate Radio*, Rugamba's variation of Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* features Rwandan actors assuming the position of the perpetrator. Here's an element that reminds us of Guy Cassiers' adaptation of *The Kindly Ones*, programmed for this season: the presence of criminals on the stage. Can the criminal not only be a catalyst of violence, but also of its representation, thus literally "setting the stage" for the transmission of an experience he has himself inflicted upon others?

Dorcy Rugamba poses with great acuity the question of the shocking image, less for what it shows than for the effects it can trigger: indeed, how not to transform the spectator into a voyeur? For Rugamba, it is critical to awaken the audience's judgement skills. Can you simply engage spectators in watching

PRESENTATION

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière noticed two trends in *The Emancipated Spectator*: Brecht's epic theatre on one hand, and Artaud's theatre of cruelty on the other.

and enjoying the suffering of others? Or is it possible, once this protocol has been set up, to impose a self-reflective process upon them that deconstructs their own inclinations and hones their critical sense? Emma Willis adopts the same stance when she chooses to distance herself from the "*in yer face*" theatre. When discussing the representation of the body, Guy Cassiers raises the question of responsibility for the things you show on stage. For him, finding out what happened in the past is not the only priority: he tries to provoke a personal emotion that connects the spectator to the event, as a commitment to the future. In this sense, the body is not only the object of a violent act, nor an "image", but it is also, as Willis notes, a medium for the transmission of cultural memory. What does it mean to witness not only events but also their consequences – the trauma and the traces it leaves in the cells of subsequent generations? The impression of extreme violence, the images which remain and how to appropriate these: all these questions are also central to *Sunken Red*, Cassiers' adaptation of the 1981 novel by Dutch writer Jeroen Brouwers. It is remarkable, given the ethical complexity of the enterprise, that a Dutch theatre company takes up the challenge to stage violence for a children's audience and, moreover, to elaborate a highly fictionalized version of an iconic Holocaust story. Cock Dieleman and Veronika Zangl's analysis of *Anne en Zef*, a dialogue between the dead Anne Frank and a child victim of an Albanese blood feud, places the performance in the context of the evolution of youth theatre in the Netherlands.

Clearly, the spectators are as ever-present in the discourses as in the practices of these directors. Let us recall that the French philosopher Jacques Rancière noticed two trends in *The Emancipated Spectator*: Brecht's epic theatre on one hand, and Artaud's theatre of cruelty on the other.[1] In the first case, the spectator maintained a distance in order to understand the process by which the spectacle represented itself and, as a consequence, was no longer carried away by mimetic illusion. In the second case, on the contrary, the spectator lost all distance, abdicating the very position of viewer. The plays discussed in our dossier seem to lie precisely at the heart of a dialectic between these two poles, drawing their strength from a specifically ethical game with the society they seek to engage with. ▮

(1) Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translated from the French by Gregory Elliot, New York & London: Verso, 2009, p. 4-5.